

Citation style

Huzzey, Richard: review of: Christer Petley, *White Fury. A Jamaican Slaveholder and the Age of Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, in: *Reviews in History*, 2019, October, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/2344, downloaded from recensio.net

First published: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2343>



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Christer Petley's book takes the life of Simon Taylor, the richest of Jamaica's 'planter class' in an age of revolutions, to reveal broader truths about the British Empire. At its core, this is a biographical study based on Taylor's extensive surviving correspondence with friends, family, and commercial allies. However, Petley uses the scrawly pen-strokes of letters to and from Taylor to contribute to diverse historiographies, using his subject's status to comment on the solidarity (or otherwise) of white West Indians and on the in/stability of an individual slave-owner. As the author notes, Taylor's life provides a platform to bridge the traditional divisions between histories considering the impacts of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions on the British Empire. The result is an exceptional book that will become a major point of reference for historians of the 18th-century Caribbean and for scholars investigating the sudden abolition of the British slave trade in 1807.

In the first section of *White Fury*, Petley shows how Taylor built a small Jamaican fortune, inherited from his father, into an exceedingly large one. Even the absences within Taylor's letters allow his biographer to make some telling inferences: The sugar baron only mentioned his mixed-race 'housekeeper' and the children she bore him in his letters to male relations implicated in the predatory sexual exploitation of a slave society. To many others, Taylor preferred to cultivate a civilized and serious image of a hard-working estate manager. If the voices and experiences of enslaved people on his estates—2,248 when he died in 1813—barely penetrate Petley's sources, then he makes inventive use of Taylor's will to offer a panoramic survey of the black lives—and, too early, deaths—surrounding the West Indian magnate.

In this way, the early chapters skilfully weave crucial background material about the slave trade and Caribbean slavery into the story of Taylor's acquisition of wealth and human property. This ensures that student readers, or those approaching the field for the first time, will not find Petley's book disorientating. Indeed, it covers the growing British hunger for sugar; the morbid reality of the transatlantic slave trade; and the perverse hypocrisy of white Creole society; so efficiently that it would serve as a good introductory work. With scholarly references confined to the endnotes and an affordable cover price, the publisher has pitched the book at a cross-over market and the author's prose deserves a wide readership.

However, Petley's work is a powerful contribution to scholarly research in its own right, as he explains the 'fall of the planter class' and the rise of anti-slavery laws that, hesitantly, dismantled the Atlantic sugar empire. The second section, in particular, extends arguments the author has developed throughout his distinguished first book—in which Taylor loomed large—and in subsequent articles. This monograph goes into greater depth, emphasising the influence exerted by West Indian planters, as well as their growing internal divisions and alienation from the 'mother country', in explaining the 1807 abolition. The book's structure allows Petley to respect a rough chronology, while developing thematic insights in particular chapters; perhaps the only difficulty arises when explaining Taylor's encounter with abolitionism on a rare trip to

England (in chapter five) before considering its emergence and political fortunes (in chapter six).

If popular abolitionism grew in the fertile conditions of metropolitan politics following the American Revolution, then Petley also sees the economic and political clout of the West India lobby declining. From the torrid natural and military threats of the 1780s to the war-time contingencies of 1805–7, the book identifies a diminished status for Jamaica and Jamaicans like Taylor. *White Fury* will, then, catalyse the ways in which histories of slavery and abolition have increasingly looked to the cultural, political, and economic interconnections between Caribbean society and British sentiment. Scholars, such as Vincent Brown, Katherine Paugh, and Sasha Turner, have been particularly adept in drawing attention to the changing attitudes to mortality, maternity, and demography in the Caribbean. Pointing to the high political context of William Pitt's and Lord Grenville's antipathy to the slave trade, Petley also suggests new attention be paid to the influence of elites and the strength of anti-abolitionism ranged against humanitarian pressure.

A crucial dynamic impacting the security and prosperity of the planter class, he shows, were the wars arising from three revolutions and the example of Haiti. These changed the place of the West Indies within the British Empire and left Caribbean plutocrats divided on how to recover their 18th-century dominance of imperial politics. Here, Petley reveals Taylor's messy, inconsistent feelings towards the British Empire, its leading politicians, and MPs with West Indian interests, such as Bryan Edwards. He draws out the (dis)connections between Creole society—charted by him and other scholars in the past decade—and the work of the West Indian lobby in the British Isles, which has received new attention from Paula Dumas, Michael Taylor, and others. But above all, Petley shows how external events altered the material and political relations within the British Atlantic, including the dynamics and perceptions of slave-resistance.

Here, the slightly awkward chronology of Taylor's life proves to be a blessing, rather than a difficulty; because he died shortly after abolition, Petley is able to focus on the dynamics of particular years and decades rather than ranging across the 50-year political controversy over Caribbean slavery. This precision in tracing reactions to slave revolts and the Haitian revolution allows the book to enhance prior work by Gelien Matthews, Claudius Fergus, and others. While Taylor's wealth made him exceptional rather than typical, his correspondence allows Petley to highlight the more pervasive, shared denial of slave agency, blaming all unrest on abolitionism.

Petley's treatment of Taylor's family relationships—especially with a younger brother and, later, a nephew—places this work in a fruitful lineage of familial histories of colonialism. The book joins Emma Rothschild's 2011 study of the Johnstone family and Katie Donington's study of the Hibberts (forthcoming, but present in Petley's footnotes from her dissertation and other publications) in underscoring the intertwined cultural, social, and economic affinities that made an empire. The biographical approach illuminates Taylor's self-image as a thrifty,

industrious investor, and his aspirations for establishing and enhancing his own—but more particularly his family’s—legacy in metropolitan Britain. His tetchy lectures to relatives living off the fruits of enslaved labour, under his management and capital, underscore the emotional gulf between Creoles, like him, and absent beneficiaries of West Indian wealth.

Indeed, one of the most powerful, latent threads throughout the book is Petley’s interest in weaving the burgeoning field of the history of emotions into the history of Caribbean slavery. The approach is developed gently, without any explicit methodological manifesto that might have burdened a wider readership. However, as the title itself emphasises, Taylor’s emotions were at the forefront of his words and deeds. The book shows that the ‘emotional landscape of colonial Jamaica was characterized by anxiety of one kind or another’ (pp. 90–1). Its subject’s fears, anger, and anxiety calibrated—or miscalibrated—his views as expressed in epistles to friends and allies. Petley points out sequential disgust, admiration, and then apprehension towards the young United States as a possible destination for a slave-owning emigrant. Drawing fruitful contrasts with American colonists’ reactions to shifting British imperial policy, an emotional perspective reveals the subjective construction of rationalities for a Caribbean slave-owner. This approach seems extremely helpful for future scholarship, both in exploring new explanatory frameworks and in navigating vast bodies of correspondence as primary sources.

In his conclusion, Petley reasserts that there was ‘nothing inevitable about the end of slavery’ and that it was ‘not inherently doomed to fail’. His emphasis on the faltering solidarity and privileges of the ‘West India interest’ is best exemplified by the story of some planters who assisted in metropolitan experiments to break the dependency of Jamaica and other British colonies on the importation of enslaved Africans to replace those murdered on plantations. Offering a nuanced interpretation, Petley shifts causal emphases and draws in new factors rather than explicitly rejecting the dominant paradigm of non-economic explanations for abolition of the slave trade. He endorses the work of David Beck Ryden in suggesting a short-run over-production of sugar as a proximate cause in the passage of the 1807 Abolition Act, but adds the changing perceptions of resistance and invasion threats as greater material factors in debates over the future of slavery in the British Empire. In this way, Petley’s work applies a wide range of new approaches to his exploration of the waning power or shifting fortunes of the slave owner, rather than pointing solely to the logics of capitalism or the tides of anti-slavery sentiment.

Poetically, the book begins and ends with insights into Taylor’s resting place at Lyssons, in the same part of Jamaica that would yield the Morant Bay revolt of 1865. Petley was shown the abandoned and dilapidated tomb, remembered in later decades only for rumours of gold hidden on his estate. Far from what Taylor might have hoped, he is barely remembered today as the former owner of the house that serves as the official residence of Jamaica’s Prime Minister. Following in the footsteps of Nick Draper and his colleagues at UCL’s Centre for the Study of the

Legacies of British Slave-ownership, the book traces the descent of Taylor's riches within Great Britain, through his distant relatives who partly white-washed the source of family wealth. One relative was Simon Watson Taylor who became, briefly, an MP and was, ironically, one of the defenders of the violent colonial reaction against the 1865 Morant Bay rising. In contrast to the Taylors, the leader of those rebels, Paul Bogle, was immortalised in a famous 1965 statue by Edna Manley.

*White Fury* is a powerful contribution to scholarship on the British Atlantic in the age of revolutions, and it deserves to be widely read—and cited—in a variety of historiographies. It is likely to hold a generative power in influencing further research into Caribbean slave societies and British imperial politics in a revolutionary period. Most importantly, it offers a template for how modern life-writing can turn a highly unappealing biographical subject into a lens to illuminate the intimate, as well as the public, career of a leading proponent of slavery and enemy of abolition.